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Forgiveness as a healing power

The INQUIRER

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches, 2001*

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Inquiring Words

Holy One, Known by Many Names

Holy One, known by many names -- Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer -- you make your presence known to us in the sunshine of winter, in the dance of the flame, and in the lingering embrace of a trusted one.

Fill us this day with your warmth, your power, your strength. Help us to see our lives with a freshness born of the spirit. Lift up the blessings: the loved ones, the ones we treasure for simply being themselves, -- the ones we laugh with, the ones who teach us to trust ourselves. Hold close the ones who are ill this day, those who feel the discouragement of the body. Stand by those who know their time is limited. Fill them and us with courage, with peace.

Gracious One, release us from our burdens. We bring the memories of the past, times when we fell short, times when we were hurt. We have fear: worries of what will be and how we will make do. We get carried away with small concerns: the daily issues that press upon us. Help us to let go. Free us from inner bonds.

We look at ourselves: the advantages we have been given, the opportunities we have seized. Fill us, O God, with a sense of gratitude for the gifts that are ours: knowledge, skills, and hard won insights. Nudge us to give back, to reach out -- sharing our talents, our riches, and ourselves with those who are discouraged, disheartened, or simply unaware; with the young, the dispossessed, the elderly.

Gracious God, grab our attention, seize us with the brightness of the day, with the miracles of life itself, that we might be filled with new passion, new resolve, heeding your quiet call to take the next step. Amen.

— Marta M Flanagan

Forgiveness as a real force for change

By **Vernon Marshall**

As a minister I have often met families to arrange a funeral who have a huge problem with one of their number. 'We never speak to Jack', they say, 'because we have never forgiven him for what he did 20 years ago.'

I always find that very sad, but that sort of expression is heard amongst our members and congregants to such an extent that I wonder if the message of true forgiveness has been forgotten. Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'An eye for an eye and the whole world goes blind.'

I once attended a spiritual retreat when, during the farewell service, we had to share with one another the words, 'God forgives you, forgive others, forgive yourself.' We said it slowly and looked into the eyes of the other members of the group. We also had to say it meaningfully. I wept that day! How very powerful that message was for me then – and how important it is to me now.

God forgives us

The reality is that we are all human, with frailties and weaknesses as well as strengths and abilities. We all make mistakes and, indeed, we continue to make mistakes. The way of wisdom is to know that we will constantly go awry but that we need to learn from this and to be able to move on with our lives having absorbed this important lesson. I believe that our flawed nature contributes to our ability to empathise. I believe that we all bear the Divine within us.

We are all sacred beings and are thus, always, forgiven and forgivable. The darker side of mainstream Christianity is the negative view it has of human nature. I hate the concept of 'sin' as an objective, something at the heart of what it means to be human. We are not basically sinful. We are not basically virtuous. We are basically human. That means that we have

the essence of the Divine within us but are flawed by our own ignorance.

We therefore do bad things all the time but we can only improve if we accept the reality of our own divinity and the joy of our being constantly forgiven. Bill Smith, a man in his 20s, lived with his mother long after his father had died. He struggled to find a life outside of the home as he was completely dominated by his needy mother.

He began a relationship with a local girl and his mother fiercely resented this. When he came home late one night after spending time with his girlfriend his mother flew into an angry and violent rage. Bill responded by hitting his mother so hard that she died. Bill thus spent a long spell in prison.

There was once a village in the Scottish Borders that had a new minister at the local church who very soon became loved and respected. He had time for everyone, member or stranger, and was looked upon almost as a gift from God. After his probationary year had been completed an objection was lodged before the Presbytery about his character. Someone suggested that he was unfit to be a minister. His congregation, and indeed the whole village, stood up for their beloved minister.

They all knew that their minister, the Rev Bill Smith, had killed his mother in a fit of temper and had served a prison sentence for it but they understood how the teachings of forgiveness spoke to his situation. They, and he, took to heart the notion of God's forgiveness. The Rev Bill Smith, though that is not his real name, became a great minister of the Church of Scotland. How does one feel that God forgives them? By knowing that the essence of religious teachings is that we are loved unconditionally. It is the knowledge that love is at the heart of the universe that allows us to make a new start every moment

(Continued on next page)



Congregations honour Vernon Marshall

Over the weekend of 28/29 October Vernon Marshall brought down the curtain on his long and distinguished ministerial career when he retired from his position of minister at Stand Unitarian Chapel, Whitefield, and at Unity Church, Bolton. A dinner was held in Vernon's honour at the Red Hall Hotel, Bury, during the evening of Saturday, 28 October, and the dinner was attended by 45 members (including spouses) from both congregations. Presentations were made to Vernon and to his wife, Martine, on behalf of both congregations by Ian Southern, Chairman of the General Council at Stand Chapel, and Vernon was warmly thanked by all present for his ministry among us over the past six years.

Vernon had already taken his last service at Unity Church on Sunday, 22 October, and so on Sunday, 29 October, the congregation at Stand played host to our friends from Unity Church, to other friends of both churches, and to the Mayor of Bury, Councillor Mrs Dorothy Gunther, as Stand Chapel celebrated its 324th anniversary on that particular day too. After the service the congregation and friends repaired to the Sunday school room for refreshments, culminating in the cutting of a retirement-themed cake prepared by a friend of one of the Stand members. Vernon and Martine were given a rousing and heartfelt send-off as the retirement celebrations drew to a close.

Photo left: Vernon Marshall cuts his retirement cake accompanied by the Mayor of Bury, Councillor Mrs Dorothy Gunther.

Forgiveness can heal the world

(Continued from previous page)

of every day. To feel unworthy – a very common trait – is to feel unloved. To feel unloved is to feel unforgiven.

Our whole mission as a religious movement is a joke, a fantasy, if we cannot accept that we are constantly forgiven. Some of the finest people I know have had a murky past. We may judge them harshly for not constantly being cowed by the knowledge of their wickedness. They have accepted, however, a cosmic forgiveness and that is what makes them worthy people. The knowledge of their being forgiven has made them the creative people they are today. 'God forgives you, forgive others, forgive yourself.'

Forgive others

The act of forgiving others is so strong and it allows for such great character making that it is a real virtue. It is vital in allowing human relationships to develop. Without Jesus's words of forgiveness for those who put him on the cross, the Church would never have been so influential. Gandhi's forgiveness of his killer, Nathuram Godse, was a transformational act that still resonates across the world today.

Nelson Mandela's recognition of his own need for forgiveness allowed his nation to examine the power of forgiveness which they could use to overcome the bitterness and strife of many decades. The reconciliation process was remarkable in preventing a bloody chaos predicted by some. Forgiving others is hard – especially if there is no word of remorse from the perpetrator.

Forgiveness offered despite this, however, is even more powerful. The Prodigal Son is forgiven without the father needing to hear a confession and this thereby prevents his son from being weighed down by uncreative guilt. There is a story in the Bhagavad Gita where King Arjuna reflects on the courage of all the warriors fighting in fierce conflicts. He begins to realise that there is something greater than courage. 'If you want to see the brave, look at those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love in return for hatred.'

Forgiving others not only changes those who receive forgiveness but also the giver. It makes you a real giver of love, a representative vehicle of the best that can be in human behaviour.

When I was at school I threw a stone at a girl in the class. It left a large and unsightly lump on her head. 'I like you more than I hate that lump,' she said, as blood trickled down her face. I was amazed. How could she be so generous after what I had done?

That day we became the best of friends. Not only was I changed by that experience but she was changed too. She became gentler and more adult. She was always a peaceful and accepting kind of person. She never spoke badly of anyone. Mostly she was at peace with herself. Frederick Buechner says, 'When you forgive someone who has wronged you, you are spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride.'

Someone once told me that forgiveness is the best form of revenge. You can become opposite to the type of person your so-called enemy thinks you are. Their object of derision transforms

into something else, something they can admire instead. 'God forgives you, forgive others, forgive yourself.'

Forgive yourself

Most of us struggle to think well of ourselves. Some Christian doctrines have downgraded human nature so much that we can even hate ourselves and feel virtuous about that. If we have a poor self-image, however, we cannot do anything worthwhile. It just takes up too much energy. We wallow in self-loathing and it becomes too easy to live like that. We need to remember that mistakes are part of what it means to be human. We have all wallowed in self-pity at times. When we are verbally attacked we tend gradually to believe the negative aspects of our selves. Acknowledge them, but then forgive yourself. The esteemed Yoga teacher, Patrick Miller, said, 'Never forget that to forgive yourself is to release trapped energy that could be doing good in the world.'

Remind yourself that you have a divine origin, that you have much to give, that you can improve the lives of others by being nice to them, by complimenting them, by encouraging them, by reminding them how magnificent they are. Forgive yourself and live in the truth that you are a wonderful divine creature, given this life to live in a joyous and fulfilling manner. I once attended a workshop on forgiveness. We were asked to write notes on separate pieces of paper about the people who had wronged us. We then forgave them individually, without naming them, in our heads. On the last piece of paper we then wrote our own names and, individually, forgave ourselves.

That last stage reduced many of us, me included, to tears. To forgive yourself is so powerful. It shifts something inside ourselves. It makes so much space for other things. It makes us look down less and look up more. It makes us look less at ourselves and more at others. It makes us sneer less and smile more. When someone is seemingly speaking against you perhaps they are really passing on their negative thoughts about themselves. Do not be hard on them. You are not the focus of their bitterness; it is really themselves.

A friend of mine was a district nurse who was once spoken to very aggressively by a male patient. She had a struggle not to respond to his nastiness towards her. She then tried to imagine that he was actually saying those things to himself. She became less defensive and spoke more warmly to him. He eventually told her his sad story of how his ex-wife took his children from him and went to live in a Communist country out of his reach. He took the blame for their absence from his life. The nurse helped him to forgive himself and he too changed remarkably. 'God forgives you, forgive others, forgive yourself.'

We let ourselves down when we do not practise forgiveness, real forgiveness. So much is done to us and to others when forgiveness operates in the world. It covers all our relationships and is an indispensable step in the renewal of our public and private lives. Every intent and every prayer should include words of forgiveness. I leave the final words to a great writer and thinker, Marianne Williamson, 'The practice of forgiveness is our most important contribution to the healing of the world.' Amen to that!

The Rev Dr Vernon Marshall is a retired Unitarian minister.

Make a difference in a child's life

I most liked the cave, and a cooked breakfast every day.

Wow, look at that!

By Peter Hewis

Every year we have quotes from children during their Send a Child to Hucklow (SACH) week and the two above are typical but from 2017 here are a few more.

The best trip was to the farmyard because I held the guinea pigs....I faced my fear of stairs....It would be really nice if it was sunny every day....I like the most when it was raining; I slid down the slide and flew off the end and got really muddy.... I would change the animals, they made noises at night and wake me up in the mornings. I don't have any pets at home.... It's peaceful and quiet and I like how you have to take your muddy shoes off.

For a change this year we quote with permission from a generous Unitarian donor, 'I was in a children's home and remember being taken to the countryside by a kind and caring group of adults, memories of those much-needed days away has stayed with me all my life and I am sure it has influenced it in many ways. My thanks to all those who run the SACH, who give the youngsters a much-needed boost.'

In 2017 we ran 13 weeks of holidays and children came



A 'SACH' child wonders at the natural world.

from Mansfield, Chesterfield, Manchester, Birmingham, Accrington (2 groups), Southend, Rotherham plus several groups from Liverpool.

Every donation, however small, is welcome but large donations have come from many Masonic Lodges thanks to the efforts of David Burton who also raised £2500 in lieu of gifts for his 60th birthday! Donations came in memory of Elizabeth Barlow, Steve Benfield, Alan Curren, Anne Eyre, David Skelton and Tim Stace. Generous legacies came from the estates of Tom Whitehead (Stalybridge) and Mary Burns (Golders Green).

One of our trustees Tom Grimshaw gave all his preaching fees amounting to £800, then for their Silver Wedding friends of two more trustees Derek and Pauline Smith

raised over £800, another trustee Dr Judith Short created artistic bookfolds for sale at the GA meetings. At our annual meeting I completed my four years as Chairman and have handed over to Sarah Benfield, a daughter of our founder the Rev Peter Godfrey. Our superb Donations Treasurer Sue Catts has also handed over to Ruth Taylor, a member of Norcliffe Chapel in Styal.

Please help us to provide more holidays in 2018.

The Rev Peter Hewis is a retired Unitarian minister.

The Send a Child to Hucklow Fund

Thanks to you we have provided holiday weeks for 56 years

Please help us to raise £50,000,

From the streets and fumes of Liverpool, Manchester and many other places to the green fields of Derbyshire, that's what your gifts provide each year.

Thanks to you there were 13 holidays in 2017 and the work goes on, so do please help us to continue giving needy children a country holiday.

Your gifts for the 2018 holidays will be as deeply appreciated as ever.

Our target is £50,000 for direct donations. It costs approximately £350 per child – including the costs of all outings – and we hope to send around 200 children.

Gifts will be gratefully received by the Donations Treasurer, Mrs Ruth Taylor, 10 Heald Grove, Heald Green, Cheadle, Cheshire, SK8 3RX. Please note that the Fund can reclaim income tax paid by any individual (as long as s/he has paid income tax) if a Gift Aid Donation form has been signed. A copy of the form will appear in the next issue of *The Inquirer*, or may be obtained from Mrs Taylor. Giving with a Gift Aid Donation form makes a gift of £20 worth £25.65 to the Fund. Gifts may now be made very easily on line, in various ways, by going to our website:

www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk

If you shop online, then please use Easyfundraising, naming 'Send-a-Child' as your beneficiary, we receive a small donation for everything purchased.

(www.easyfundraising.org.uk/)

The Fund is a registered charity, number 271585. All gifts are used for the holidays – except for gifts in someone's memory that are put into a Capital Account with the interest used for holidays. Please remember the Fund in your will. Legacies are a much appreciated and valuable income.

Copies of the full 2016-17 report and appeal may be obtained from the Hon Secretary, Rev Ernest Baker, 145 Tullibardine Road, Sheffield, South Yorks, S11 7GN, telephone 0114 266 1070.

Dublin Unitarians re-enact L



As a nod to the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his theses to the church door in 1517, a nail which went a long way to kick-starting the Reformation, members of the Dublin Unitarian Church (in period costume) nailed their church's modern Unitarian theses to their own door on 27 October – dressed in costumes appropriate to 1517. It is also 200 years since the Unitarian Act, an act of parliament, gave freedom to Unitarians in Ireland to practise their religion without hindrance. This was four years after the same act had been passed in England, Scotland and Wales. 'Rather than try to re-enact the more significant Act of Parliament, we (brought) Martin Luther back to life for a few minutes, and giving him the job of nailing an up to date document to our door,' said Dr Martin Pulbrook, who has devoted his life to researching Unitarianism and early Christianity.

The Rev Bill Darlison, Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian Church, compiled this document, which represents modern Unitarian beliefs in the 21st century. It lists 10 beliefs held by members, including that all human beings have the right to pursue the 'big questions' of existence, to constantly revise and refine their views and are free to come to their own conclusions about religion and other matters. Unitarians believe that human life is sacred, that each human being is unique and precious, and has something valuable to offer.

46 Theses -- Don't worry, the oth

In 1517, monk and university lecturer, Martin Luther pinned the original 95 theses on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Most of his Theses dealt with a particular complaint: the practice of the church selling indulgences – payments for receiving pardon from sins committed. This and the other writings of Luther, Calvin and others, eventually resulted in a major split in the church, known as the Reformation and the creation of the Protestant or Reformed churches.

Arguably, the church, particularly in Western Europe, is in much greater trouble today than it was then. Only a small minority of the population now attend church on a regular basis and few people accept that the church carries particular moral, or other, authority in their lives.

The theses below try to address the context of the Christian faith for today and what is required to give it real credibility and meaning for the 21st century. They are presented as my personal view, to spark discussion. (*Please send your thoughts for the discussion to: Inquirer@btinternet.com -- ed.*)

The Global Age

Many of these factors create a sense of uncertainty, anxiety, alienation and meaninglessness.

1 So many of us today live lives of wounded fragmentation desperately seeking solace or distraction, but failing to find healing or wholeness, or a way of living life at a deeper level of meaning. Instead we often turn to ways of trying to mask our emptiness through drugs or alcohol, or other diversions.

2 The era of unchallenged authority has long gone. People are no longer satisfied with religion as a top-down external imposed set of moral rules and beliefs. Religion, includ-

ing Christianity, is now a choice to take or leave, as we want.

3 Any faith for the 21st century, if it is to be credible, needs to encourage, rather than discourage, the use of the intellect, to respond positively to the challenges of science and allow for deep questioning. Nothing can be taken for granted.

4 While there is an increasing rejection of institutional religion and religious authority and tradition, there is, paradoxically, an increasing interest in spirituality – a desire to bring greater context and meaning to our lives and enable us to live richer and more meaningful lives. There is a real desire to achieve a sense of personal wholeness, purpose and direction, within a fragmented alienating world.

5 There is a longing for a spirituality which is person-centred, humane, truth-seeking, open to doubt and questioning, in tune with our understanding of the natural world, which supports human growth and self-actualisation, encourages love of others, particularly those who are looked down on by society and champions social justice.

Rediscovering Christianity's radical routes

6 The Christian faith was born as a radical faith in a hostile world. The adoption of Christianity as the official state-sponsored religion from the third century onwards to the present has done more to cloud the true message of Christianity than any other development in the last 1,800 years.

7 As Christianity became aligned with the powerful in countries which officially became Christian, the churches tended to adopt a top-down orthodoxy which supported the actions of states against its more powerless and different citizens and against other states and religions.

8 The worst examples of this alignment of Christian-

er's stance with '10 Beliefs'

'The list has evolved over the years,' said Reverend Bridget Spain, Dublin's present minister. 'I'm sure most people will find that they agree with many or all of its points.' Unitarians are not called upon to believe in statements of metaphysical speculation. We have no creed. However:

1) We believe that all human beings have the right to pursue the big questions of existence, and that these questions are best approached in a supportive and understanding community free from dogmatic assumptions, inherited prejudices, indoctrination, or coercion. Each person should be free to come to his or her own conclusions about religion as about other matters.

2) We believe in constantly revising and refining our views and opinions in matters of faith. Faith is a living thing which may evolve with experience and reflection.

3) We believe that human life is sacred; that each human being is unique and precious, and has something valuable to offer.

4) We believe that differences between people based on gender, sexual orientation or gender identity are to be celebrated and valued, and that we are all entirely equal. These differences should never be a reason to exclude a person from membership or bar them from ministry.

5) We believe that we have a responsibility to care for the weak, the vulnerable, and the dispossessed in our own society, and throughout the world.

6) We believe that community is important and that human beings don't live fully or creatively in isolation. We need each other. We need to share our joys and sorrows, and we need to share and celebrate our sacred moments together.

7) We believe in democracy. That spiritual communities should be run by and on behalf of their members, and that authority to preach and to minister should be conferred by the community, not by any external agency.

8) We believe in respecting all religious traditions, because despite often failing to live up to their highest ideals, they have given the world inspiring ideas, nurtured great minds, and fostered noble acts.

9) We believe that all religious scriptures are human products and that they must be interpreted with care and compassion, recognising that words on a page can never take precedence over reason, kindness, and respect for all.

10) We believe that the earth is fragile and precious, and it and every living thing upon it must be treated with reverence and respect.

49 will appear in the next issue

ity to powerful elites include the Crusades and the support of imperialist expansion of countries wishing to expand their empires in the 18th and 19th centuries.

9 The trend towards the separation of church and state and the more recent decline in church membership and attendance, paradoxically, creates the potentiality for Christianity to rediscover its radical roots as a dynamic group of followers committed to breaking down barriers between peoples, in working for the liberation of the poor and powerless and promoting love and compassion in the world.

Central Christian teaching

10 Jesus called us to show compassion for others, regardless of how different they are from us. This is the core of the Christian message – to help others grow and develop their potential – to facilitate human becoming.

11 Jesus calls us to expand the realm of love throughout the world. This love calls us into being – it expands our lives as it flows through us. In particular, Jesus taught and demonstrated how we should value and support those who are currently looked down on by society, opposing political and religious elites.

12 It is clear from the life of Jesus and those who followed that the Christian life also requires the courage to be unpopular, to stand up to the wealthy and powerful on behalf of the poor and powerless regardless of the consequences.

Respect and diversity

13 The central Christian ethic is the acceptance of the basic worth of every human being regardless of their background, beliefs, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and

our responsibility to love them unconditionally. This has important implications.

14 Women and men have an equal value, and the right to the same range of choices. The churches have generally a very poor record in their treatment of women. Patriarchy, sexism and other manifestations of gender discrimination have no place within the Christian faith.

15 The well-known story of the Good Samaritan makes it clear that all forms of racism, xenophobia and sectarianism should be entirely rejected by Christianity. Tackling all forms of direct and indirect prejudice in society is a key Christian imperative.

16 Anti-Semitism has, in the past, received both direct and tacit support from the Christian churches and other religions. It has no place within Christianity.

17 Discrimination on the grounds of a person's sexuality should also not be acceptable in Christianity, either within its policies, attitudes or within its own structures.

Ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue

18 No faith, church or denomination can have an exclusive claim on truth. Jesus is an important pathway to truth for many people, but not the only pathway.

19 We have much to learn from the ideas, actions and writings of other Christian churches and denominations. Ecumenical dialogue has therefore much to teach us.

20 Dialogue with those of other faiths can also be a rich and valuable experience for Christians and those of other faiths. Christians can gain valuable insights from those of other faiths, even of those with very divergent views, including teachings by those with no religious faith.

(Continued on next page)

Bible stories are metaphors

(Continued from previous page)

21 Conflict between Christian denominations and between Christian churches and other faiths does not reflect the teaching of Jesus and has fed sectarian attitudes, prejudice and the most appalling violence and done immense damage to the credibility of Christianity.

22 The collusion of the churches with particular sides in political and military conflicts has also seriously damaged the credibility of the Christian faith.

23 Christians should be known for their love, forgiveness, openness to learning and commitment to social justice and the inclusion of the excluded, and should not be in the business of pressurising or persuading those of other faiths to become Christians, or discriminating against those who are not Christians.

24 There are people of almost all faiths, and of none, who have a strong commitment to seeking the truth, to loving others, and promoting social justice and human rights, who should be working closely together to create a richer understanding of truth and bringing about social change.

Calling to be peacemakers

25 Jesus called us to forgive those who do us wrong, to turn the other cheek to violence and to love our enemies. We are therefore called to be peacemakers in the world – to enable reconciliation and forgiveness to take place.

26 God is never on the side of a country or group engaged in war or oppression.

The Bible

27 The bible is the attempt of many authors and editors to describe the meaning of truth as they saw it. It needs to be understood in the context of when and why the various parts of it were written. It should not be interpreted as literal history, biography, or as written by God.

28 Attempts by theologians, historians, linguists and others to help us develop a better understanding of the Bible and the context in which it was written are to be welcomed and supported.

29 There is virtually no evidence that the various parts of the New Testament were written by people who actually knew Jesus when he was alive, but represent attempts – many years after his death – to articulate various theological understandings of Jesus, and, as the writers saw it, particularly his divine nature and the extent he was the fulfilment of various old testament prophecies.

30 The later the New Testament writing, the more it reflects a desire to highlight a supernatural and miraculous understanding of Jesus.

31 The Bible allows for many different interpretations. It does not lay down a single clear theology which can be followed unambiguously.

32 As would be expected with different writers describing events second hand, the gospels are at times contradictory (e.g. the genealogy of Jesus, the birth stories, the empty tomb stories, the resurrection stories)

33 No translation of the Bible is perfect in terms of accuracy or language. The key should be the ability to convey the message in a way that can be understood in the current context with a minimum of exclusive language.

34 The biblical accounts of the creation of the world should be interpreted poetically rather than literally. Christians should welcome scientific developments in terms of understanding the origins and unfolding of the universe and the evolution of the human race.

35 The biblical accounts of the Christmas story and the virgin birth should be interpreted poetically rather than literally. They were later attempts to try to highlight the divine nature of Jesus and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies.

36 The miracle stories in the bible should be interpreted poetically or metaphorically, rather than literally. Many of the stories reflect the pre-scientific understanding of the time, when even the weather was believed to be result of divine action. The addition of other super-natural acts in accounts of Jesus, at a later stage, was intended to highlight the divine nature of Jesus.

37 The resurrection, empty tomb and ascension stories should also be interpreted poetically or metaphorically rather than literally. They were added to highlight the extent that the death of Jesus was not the end, but the beginning, for the followers of Jesus who were empowered to fulfil their calling as followers of Jesus, whose presence continued to fill their lives.

Jesus

38 Jesus was filled with the divine spirit, which enabled him to demonstrate an incredible boundless ability to love in the context of great hate and fear. He showed that only self-giving love can overcome fear, bitterness and egoism.

39 Jesus was deeply and fully alive, constantly dismantling the barriers that separate people from one another, inviting us to walk without fear beyond our security boundaries that block our access to a deeper humanity, barriers of prejudice which diminish our own humanity as well as that of others.

40 Jesus called us into a new human unity and refused to be bound by the rules that arise out of our incompleteness and our fear. He was an enabler of Life, a source of being for others – enabling others to become the person they really are.

41 Jesus was not only an example to follow, but a vision of reality and of the future that compels us to change and to act. He called us to walk in the path of wholeness towards a new humanity.

42 Jesus led a move away from a narrow legalistic and ritualistic understanding of religion to one based on ideals of the heart – on boundary-shattering, self-giving love and compassion.

43 In Jesus, people have been able to see the unconditional quality of love, the depth and richness of human life, and the divine spirit that flowed through his life.

44 Jesus was truly and fully a human being. He could not see into the future or what was happening on the other side of the universe. He was not all-powerful – he couldn't fly, move mountains, walk on water, or raise people from the dead.

45 Jesus brought healing to broken lives and broken relationships

46 Incarnation is not only a statement that, in a real sense, the divine was in Jesus, but also that the divine is in all of us and we can let that divine reality flow through our lives and enable it to flow through other lives.

Roger Courtney is a Unitarian and member of All Souls Non-Subscribing Church Belfast.

Luther - Not an 'insignificant little man'

That full-page picture of Martin Luther on the cover of the last issue of *The Inquirer* jumped out at me. Reading his character from his face and eyes was difficult. Did he really march up to the door of Wittenberg church 500 years ago, nail a document on it with 95 theses, arguments against Catholic doctrines, and say, 'Here I stand, I can do no other'? I hope so, as I love the drama of it.

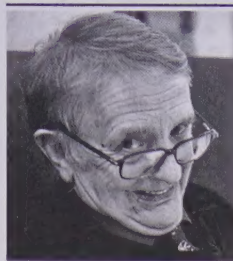
There has been some theorising about Luther being a spiritual forbear of Hitler. Odd really, as Hitler was raised a Catholic and, unforgettably, said about Protestant ministers, 'They are insignificant little men, as submissive as dogs, and they sweat with embarrassment when you talk to them.' I hope I would have perspired profusely had I ever met him.

I once sat in a Lutheran church near Potsdam to watch my wife Celia conduct a marriage blessing. Outside, I smiled at the wide-eyed look on the townsfolk who had turned out to watch the arrival of the German-born bride. She was led to the church by pipers in full regalia, young relatives of the Scottish-born groom, a rare sight and sound for the locals. Later, a chimney-sweep appeared, handing out plums, a local wedding-day custom. Inside the church were photographs of the work undertaken to modernise the interior. I asked the minister, 'Did all your congregants approve of those alterations?' He gave me a knowing smile. 'Not until it was finished. Now they like it. It's much warmer in here than it was.' Like us, Lutherans love their church buildings.

I learn from a recent visit that Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians are still uncertain about the future of their building. They are hoping for a miracle, that an enormously generous benefactor will appear to enable essential renovations. Another possible option would be to share or rent space from a nearby church, coincidentally, Lutheran.

The Reformation anniversary prompts thoughts about the relations between Unitarians and Roman Catholics. The struggle for religious freedom and equality in Britain in the past briefly brought these two persecuted groups together. Recently, my attention was drawn by colleague Peter Hewis to an October series of Radio 3 broadcasts about Edward Elgar. Peter writes, 'The first broadcast mentioned the composer's engagement to Helen Weaver. Alas, the engagement was broken off, for two possible reasons: 1. Her parents thought Elgar's status was beneath her. I doubt that, as they owned a shoe shop opposite the Elgars' music shop in Worcester.' Peter adds, 'I've always thought the break-up of the engagement was for reason 2. He was a Catholic and she was a Unitarian. I think this is so because certainly in my childhood and youth, and for a long time after, Catholics were discouraged from marrying outside the faith and for some time could be excommunicated for doing so.'

The broadcast mentioned how miserable Elgar was when Helen broke off the engagement before sailing out of his life forever aboard a ship bound for New Zealand. He wrote a gavotte *Contrasts*, based on some dancers they had seen whilst together in Leipzig. One of his *Enigma Variations*, No. 13, *Romanza* is said to represent Lady Mary Lygon's voyage to Australia. But several writers think it was really for Helen. Wishing her well Elgar quoted, in the *Variations*, Mendelssohn's *A*



Funny Old World

By John Midgley

Calm Sea and a Prosperous Voyage. He also wrote a song for her. It was a Unitarian, Sir Adrian Boult, who really pushed for the BBC to play more music by the Catholic Elgar. Boult is considered the finest conductor of Elgar's immortal music, some of it composed out of the sufferings caused by religious division.

Peter also drew my attention to the Fisher Trust (1889), set up by a Unitarian married to a Catholic. The beneficiaries are to be women of reduced means, aged over 45 and to be of Unitarian or RC persuasion.

My experience of Roman Catholicism is mixed. In Altrincham the RCs resisted the admission of Unitarians into the local Council of Churches. In central Manchester they didn't. I had an amiable relationship with the priest at St Mary's, known as the Hidden Gem. I envied their large attendances. It puzzled me that the greatest numbers streamed in for Mass on Saturday evenings, not Sunday. Many of the younger folk queued up to make Confession before a Saturday night on the town. This raises questions about Sunday observance, as well as the sacrament of Confession, something Protestants abandoned after the Reformation. Currently, the strict tradition of the secrecy of the Confessional box is being challenged. In Australia, a priest failing to report child abuse to the authorities could face criminal charges, even if the knowledge of it has been obtained under the 'seal of Confession'. In Baton Rouge in the US, a woman sued the Catholic Diocese and a priest for doing nothing when, as a teenager, she 'confessed' that she was being abused by a parishioner. The Louisiana supreme court, however, upheld the confidentiality of Confession.

What would Luther have done? I'll look at his picture again and try to work that out.

It has been mentioned to me that for some time there has been little in this column that could be described as 'funny', i.e. amusing, and I concur. Put it down to the state of the world. To redeem things, I offer the following, lifted without apology from a 2003 issue of the *Guardian*:

'In our interview with Sir Jack Hayward, the chairman of Wolverhampton Wanderers, page 20, Sport, yesterday, we mistakenly attributed to him the following comment: 'Our team was the worst in the First Division, and I'm sure it'll be the worst in the Premier League.' Sir Jack had just declined the offer of a hot drink. What he actually said was 'Our tea was the worst in the First Division and I'm sure it'll be the worst in the Premier League.' Profuse apologies.'

Merry Christmas everybody!

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Letters to the Editor

Women's League channels Unitarian generosity

To the Editor:

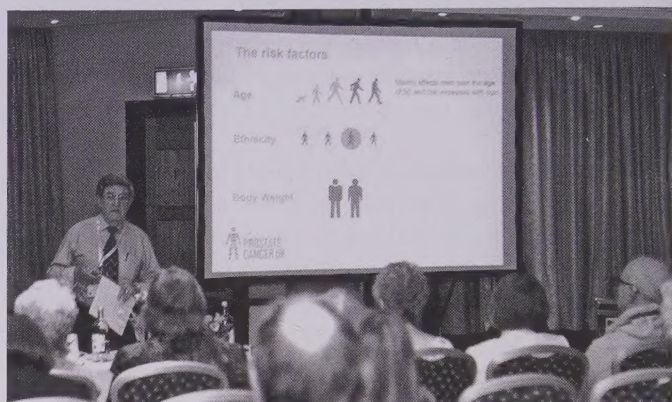
Unitarians are a generous lot – or should I say ‘few’? There are not many of us and too many charities over which we space ourselves thinly so we are not known for any one thing.

The Rev Kate Dean's article (*The Inquirer*, 4 November) about Toilet Twinning, with a map of churches' flags where things happen and how, made me wonder whether perhaps every congregation needs a flag. The article also led me to consider the congregations which still have a Women's League branch.

Unitarian Women's League? What's that? Oh yes, Women's League, begun in 1908 so almost 110 years old, getting weaker in the number of branches (there are now none in London, for example) and the average age of members gets higher, but it is still at work. At work we sometimes keep a roof over the church, cater for special events, have fun sharing jokes and look out for each other. Raising between £6,000 and £10,000 each year for a different 'National Project', last year we supported the Deaf Children's Society and this year we think of the men and Prostate Cancer. Next year it will be the Sepsis Trust.

One year the League raised more than £7000 for a social hall in the Khasi Hills for orphanage use. The India Fund has always supported the Khasi Hills Unitarian churches. There is also a Memorial/Benevolent Fund for members. The latest League Letter mentions just a few activities in branches – strawberry teas, coffee mornings, sales, raffles, percussion workshop, making marmalade, knitting mice (?), selling children's books.

Church newsletters reveal a large number of social activities. Mill Hill Leeds has an asylum seekers Conversation Club, Croydon helps refugees, at Upper Chapel Sheffield (where I once stirred soup for 'War on Want' Hunger Lunches), folk are collecting new underpants and socks, and will soon be carol singing, for local charities. The Rev Feargus O'Connor



Women's League members and guests learn about Prostate Cancer, at the GA meetings. Photo by Molly Ramsay.

at Golders Green works wonders in encouraging us to support disaster relief by means of the Clara Barton Red Cross appeals. Very soon many churches will be doing sundry Christmas things to raise money for the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund. Expect the Annual Appeal any time now. The first year's appeal in 1961 – a letter to *The Inquirer* – raised £64 for one group of children and now about £50,000 is the target to give more than 200 children, 13 groups, a holiday in beautiful Derbyshire countryside. The Fund helped to keep the Great Hucklow Centre alive and 'ours' during the difficult years of the '60s.

There are countless instances of individual church, chapel and fellowship members giving their time to social causes. For example a retired member of our Reading Fellowship works several days a week in Reading's Oxfam bookshop. There is no end to the time given and the goodwill of so many Unitarians.

Sheila Godfrey

Stonehouse, Glos.

Sheila Godfrey is a Life Member and Past National President of the Women's League.

Freemasons are keen to help SACH

To the Editor:

It was in our role as Trustees of 'Send a Child to Hucklow' that we were invited early in November to speak to a meeting of around 60 representatives of Lodges of Freemasons in the County of Nottinghamshire. We hoped that what we told them about providing holidays for today's disadvantaged children would result in some further generous donations from the Freemasons. We know Freemasons are keen to support us, especially when a group of the children provided with a holiday comes from their area, and where administration costs are kept to a minimum.

This has suggested to us that other lodges of Freemasons around the country might

well be favourably inclined to support financially the work of Send a Child to Hucklow if they knew about us, especially in places such as Liverpool, Accrington, Birmingham and Southend, from where groups of children will be going to Hucklow in 2018. We know that these holidays do make a difference to children's lives.

If any readers of *The Inquirer* are Freemasons, or are in contact with people they know to be Freemasons, we would be happy to provide further details of the work of Send A Child to Hucklow. So, too, any readers who know of schools or groups of children in disadvantaged areas who might be interested in the holidays.

Derek and Pauline Smith

Mansfield, Notts.

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com. Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only.

Fill a stocking with 'Funny Old World'

Regular readers of *The Inquirer* will be no strangers to the engaging 'diary-style' articles penned by the Rev John Midgley. Humour, information and 'a point of view' combine to make the page an interesting and entertaining read.

John, now retired, has over 50 years of experience in Unitarian Ministry, religious education and church 'politics' in the UK and internationally. So, he writes and speaks with some authority.

It comes as no surprise that this selection of *Inquirer* 'gems' from 2011 to 2015 has proved so successful that it is being reprinted having sold out in less than two years. Topics prompted by the passing of time such as World War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, sit beside up to date comments from the *Guardian* and recollections of Unitarians in living memory.

John doesn't shy away from the age-old doctrines and dogmas we don't believe or the tongue in cheek pedantic details of

Funny Old World



Sideways Observations
from *The INQUIRER*

JOHN MIDGLEY

grammar to which some can be devotees. If this sounds highbrow don't worry, it doesn't take long before it's on to Church pews and toilets!

The book makes excellent reading for established Unitarians – who may chuckle – and for our many new Unitarians who will be drawn in by John's compelling style and wealth of knowledge.

If you're looking for stocking filler this Christmas or a resource for daily reflection in the coming year, look no further.

– Martin Whitell

'Funny Old World: Sideways Observations from The Inquirer' is available by post from the Rev John Midgley,
2 Hirds Yard, Skipton, North Yorkshire,
BD23 2AF

Special offer: £6.99 + £2.50 post and packing.
Cheques payable to J Midgley

Learning to LEAP into leadership

By Fran Hill

What made the first Leading Enabling Affirming People (LEAP) weekend so special? First, it was the connection we shared which sparked during the badge-making session before dinner on Friday evening – crafting took our minds off getting to know each other, and the conversations flowed easily. Then there was the speed with which the group gelled, and the safety we quickly generated that enabled us to share vulnerably. The leaders' facilitation ensured it was an inclusive group where everybody's contributions were valued.

The training was experiential and there was lots of hilarity intertwined in the games and exercises. On Saturday we examined the different leadership styles, when to use each one and what makes an effective leader, and engaged in an exploration of what we thought our leadership preferences were. Onto the games that revealed how we really led! This was all done in an environment of safety, fun and self-discovery – there were no right or wrong answers. This meant there was an openness to our self-development and an acknowledgement that how we lead may sometimes not align with our personal values. The worship service we co-created on Sunday was one of the most moving I have attended. It was a delight to experience everybody's contributions.

The days may have been packed but they went quickly and there were adequate breaks in between the sessions. It's much easier to get out of your comfort zone when you're with like-minded people, when it's done within the safety of a friendly, well-contained group, and you're enjoying yourself at the same



LEAP participants enjoyed a weekend at the Unitarian Conference Centre at Great Hucklow. Photo provided by Margaret Robinson

time. We've been put in pairs/threes geographically to support one another over the coming months, and have homework to help consolidate what we achieved over the 3-days until our last weekend together next June.

Special thanks to the trainers John Harley and Liz Hills, and to Margaret Robinson for organising the training.

Additional thanks to East Midlands Union and Belper Unitarian Chapel for covering the financial cost of this course between them for myself and another attendee from Belper.

Fran Hill is the Secretary and a worship leader at Belper Unitarian Chapel.

Fellowship finds peace within

By Duncan Voice

Emerging from my room at 6.20am I shut my door quietly so as not to disturb my neighbours. The creaking floorboards of Sarum College proved a little more tricky to negotiate quietly though, as I made my way to the appointed room for an hour of meditation. As I entered the dark room, lit only by a candle, the questions flickered across my mind: Should I have stayed in bed; all activities are optional after all? Would I be able to sit quietly for an hour? I was early, only one other person in the room, I took my seat. Nothing said.

I found a comfortable posture, upright, hands in my lap, feet on the floor, head slightly inclined, but to completely close my eyes or not that was the question now. I decided not, to start. I bring awareness to my breath. Relax. Someone else enters, and some others. Moving, settling. Back to my breath. Some silence. I gently close my eyes.

Outside the world begins to stir. The majestic Salisbury Cathedral would be revealed once more. The cathedral clock strikes a brief tune every quarter of an hour. Someone fidgets, it draws my attention, but I'm aware. I come back to my breath.

My mind wanders, caught in the story of a thought. How long have I been dreaming? How long since the last chime? I return to my breath, keeping still, unmoving. Briefly I open my eyes to stop drowsiness. The morning light has begun to fill the room, dark shadows receding in the half-light. A time of peace.

A pain in my back, I slightly adjust. Trying to be aware of the pain and embrace it – but it hurts. It goes. I return to my breath. Others in the building start to move about, a latecomer enters. Doors open and shut in other places. A voice outside. My breath flows gently.

Then it comes, the final chime, 'When you are ready come out of your posture'. My eyes open to full morning light. I ache a bit. I need to move. How do I feel? I feel peaceful, and I feel kinship with my fellow meditators – we exchange smiles.



Meditation Fellowship participants at Sarum College. Photo illustration provided by Kate Dean.

Gentle exercise now.

Throughout the weekend we learnt about listening, really listening to another. We all want to be heard, but can we really listen? Trying not to judge, to condemn, to jump in and try to fix it. What is really behind that problem, their irritation, my frustration? And we danced, gently, happily.

At the end we shared, and yes we listened. Then we hugged in fond farewell, peace, friendship and fellowship in evidence. And me? I am glad I made time to be.

If you would like to try meditation, refresh your current practice or simply have some time to be, then you are welcome to join The Meditation Fellowship in 2018. Details below:

24-26 April at Sarum College, Salisbury

2-4 November at Grasmere, Cumbria

13-15 July at Sarum College, Salisbury

Contact: Alf Withington, alfwithington@gmail.com, or ring 0775 7548451

Duncan Voice is a Unitarian ministry student.



Rochdale Unitarian Church are looking to recruit an individual with sound administrative and interpersonal skills together with a flexible and energetic approach.

The overall purpose of the post is to support the Church Council and provide administrative assistance for the work of the Church.

Part Time Administrative Assistant

This is a part time appointment of 10 to 15 hours per week based on annualised hours, for a 1 year fixed term in the first instance.

Expressions of interest with CVs to be received before midnight
on 15 December 2017.

Informal enquiries/applications should be sent to
illingworth.j@icloud.com

